

St. Petersburg Times June 10, 1990

LIKE LIFE: Stories

By *Lorrie Moore*

Knopf, \$18.95.

The question is as haunting today as when John Lennon first asked it: all the lonely people, where do they all come from? Some of the most interesting ones are coming from the pen of Lorrie Moore. In her second story collection, Moore raises loneliness to a tragic art form.

Her first collection, *Self-Help* (1985), thrust Moore into the constellation of gifted young stars that included Amy Hempel, Mona Simpson, Susan Minot and Jayne Anne Phillips. Yet it was, for all its wry ingenuity, formative work, rich with verbal tricks. Wordplay can entertain, but only action, emotion and human understanding will deeply engage. *Self-Help* was deft but still apprentice work. Moore's next book, the novel *Anagrams*, while containing even sharper wit, showed a dramatic leap in maturity and depth, a Chaplinesque ability to simultaneously amuse and affect. Now Moore applies her wit and wisdom to the short story form in a darker and deeper collection than her first.

In *Like Life* the demands and intrinsic pain of love frighten people into isolation. "One year of living alone," their friends advise, "and you're ruined for life. You'll be spoiled. You'll never go back." Love seems impossible to sustain in a world where men and women grow ever further apart, to the point where one woman wonders, "Do you suppose . . . that the rise in infertility among so many couples in this country is due to completely different species' trying to reproduce?" When they emerge from solitude in feeble attempts at connection, men and women resemble gorillas: "when they had been kept too long alone in cages, they would smack each other in the head instead of mating."

Love in these stories is too tricky, too fraught with peril to take a chance on. Mamie, in the title story, suspects that "for love to last, you had to have illusions or have no illusions at all. But you had to stick to one or the other. It was the switching back and forth that endangered things." Mamie's "marriage seemed like a saint, guillotined and still walking for miles through the city, carrying its head," and she envies an unmarried friend who doesn't have a love life, just a like life. The more characters ponder either love or its absence, the worse things become, like one character who wears a T-shirt reading: *Wino Cogito: I Think Therefore I Drink*.

Fifty-one year-old Millie in "Places to Look for Your Mind" turns on the radio and hears news of the garbage barge unable to find a place to dock. Unwanted and drifting, the barge is a metaphor for her own life. A kindly woman, she has never started the business she'd hoped, never traveled. With "the round, drying face of someone who once and briefly—a long ago fall, a weekend perhaps—had been very pretty without ever even knowing it," Millie lives abandoned by her grown children with a stodgy, remote,

patronizing husband who considers her his only friend as she waits futilely for her life to begin. She brushes off the few bleak invitations life offers with "It's not my thing," her daughter's phrase, "powerful with self-forgiveness."

Mary, in the superb bittersweet "Two Boys," dates two men, one married, the other morose and smothering, while dreaming of Number Three, the combination of the two, the one she wants but who doesn't exist. So she is left to wonder, "How does one get here? How does one's eye-patched, rot-toothed life lead one along so cruelly, like a trick, to the middle of the sea?"

In "Joy," Jane, like many Moore characters an Easterner seeking escape in the Midwest, "knew there were only small joys in life—the big ones were too complicated to be joys when you got all through." So she finds alien territory. When she gives a co-worker a look, "It said 'Please forgive me.' It also said 'What is your problem?' and '*Have a nice day.*' Pleasantness was the machismo of the Midwest. There was something athletic about it. You flexed your face into a smile and let it hover there like the dare of a cat." Bit by bit, Jane envisions her life down to a small scale, not trusting any large one, alone in a world where her minor sadnesses flow together into a glacial crush.

There's Zoë in perhaps this brilliant collection's best story, "You're Ugly, Too," a tense balance of banter and ghoulish melancholy. According to a frightening sonogram, Zoë may have little time to live, not enough to conquer the fear of men hiding nakedly behind her transparent mask of humor and despair. She seems a cousin to Dennis and Mave in "Starving Again." Left by his wife, Dennis sits with his friend Mave who "looked at Dennis' face and was glad no one had broken up with her recently. When someone broke up with you, you became very unattractive, and it confirmed all the doubts that person had ever had about you to begin with." Terrified of love, they sit and talk about it "because our parents were sickos, and we're starved for it." Yet, rather than seek intimacy they retreat into jokes. "You know what I've decided?" Mave announces. "I don't want to be cremated. I used to, but now I think it sounds just a little too much like a blender speed."

Disarmed by their humor, we don't see these stories' hard truths before they strike us. Their characters seem like Mercutio, off guard and joking, while the point slips in unseen and with deadly accuracy. In her uniquely inventive voice, Lorrie Moore has produced a fearless book about fear. She has taken notes on a world where terror of intimacy, the very thing they want most, makes people cringe within a cocoon of wisecracks. Like her character Odette in "The Jewish Hunter" who is accused by her date, "Everything's a joke with you," Moore could answer, "Nothing's a joke with me. It just all comes out like one."